

## VU Research Portal

### No Kids in the Middle: Dialogical and Creative Work with Parents and Children in the Context of High Conflict Divorces

van Lawick, J.M.; Visser, M.M.

***published in***

Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy  
2015

***DOI (link to publisher)***

[10.1002/anzf.1091](https://doi.org/10.1002/anzf.1091)

***document version***

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

***citation for published version (APA)***

van Lawick, J. M., & Visser, M. M. (2015). No Kids in the Middle: Dialogical and Creative Work with Parents and Children in the Context of High Conflict Divorces. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy*, 36(1), 33-50. <https://doi.org/10.1002/anzf.1091>

**General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

**Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

**E-mail address:**

[vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl](mailto:vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl)



# **No Kids in the Middle: Dialogical and Creative Work with Parents and Children in the Context of High Conflict Divorces\***

Justine van Lawick<sup>1</sup> and Margreet Visser<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Lorentzhuys Center for Systemic Therapies, Training and Consultation, Haarlem

<sup>2</sup> Children's Trauma Center, Haarlem

This article contains a description of the context, development and delivery of *No kids in the middle*, a group approach for divorced fighting parents and their children. After addressing the social and legal context of high conflict divorces, we describe the main characteristics of this destructive dynamic. We describe some aspects of the approach and give examples. Key principles for the project include: keeping the child in mind; working in groups; stopping legal processes; making free space for interactions; creative presentation ceremonies; and reaching out to the network. The outcomes are promising. Research on the project has started.

**Keywords:** divorce, high conflict, dialogue, group approach, creative work, network

## **Key Points**

- 1 Working with families in high conflict divorce is one of the most complex areas of clinical practice.
- 2 The provision of a unique eight sessions group programme in the Netherlands holds promise for dealing with the impasse experienced by parents and children (and also professionals).
- 3 Key principles of this programme are keeping the child in mind, working in groups, stopping legal processes, making free space for interactions, creative presentation ceremonies, inclusion of the family's networks.
- 4 The programme seeks to provide three safe therapeutic dialogical spaces – for parents, for children and for the network of involved persons around them.
- 5 Within this space therapists support curiosity, open dialogue, openness to the unexpected, responsiveness, spontaneity and creativity.
- 6 The group provides an opportunity for children to witness their parents taking responsibility for them, while providing parents the opportunity to witness how their children are experiencing their current situation.

Working with families who continue in bitter dispute after divorce is, for many experienced couple, child and family therapists, one of the most complicated areas of their practice. What is effective in therapy with families and children often seems not to work in these cases. Distrust, paranoia and the taking of a defensive stance, by one or both parents, frustrates the formation of a safe therapeutic relationship in which therapy might help. Ongoing legal fights or the threat of new legal proceedings, with the stress and financial consequences this imposes, complicate the dynamic.

Two specialised centres in Haarlem, the Netherlands – the Lorentzhuys, and the Children's Trauma Center (KJTC) – struggled to find a useful way to work with

---

Address for correspondence: Justine van Lawick, Lorentzhuys Center for Systemic Therapies, Training and Consultation, Haarlem, the Netherlands, jvanlawick@gmail.com

\*Some parts of this article are taken from a Dutch article published in *Systeemtherapie*. Van Lawick, M.J. (2012). Vechtscheidende ouders en hun kinderen. *Systeemtherapie*, 24(3), 129–150.

All case material is de-identified. Quotes are translated in to English.

these families. The Lorentzhuis is a centre for systemic therapy, training and consultation; and the KJTC is a centre for treatment, training and consultation focused on traumatised children and their families. Both centres receive referrals from diverse professional contexts: child protection, child and youth health, psychiatry, other health agencies, psychotherapy and family therapy services, as well as the legal system and mediation services. In recent times a growing number of referrals has involved complicated high conflict divorce situations. Often the professionals who referred to us had arrived at an impasse with these clients. It was as if not only the children, but also the professionals, could end up in the middle.

Experienced couple and family therapists at the Lorentzhuis tried hard to promote a therapeutic dialogical space in which to create more safety for both family members and professionals. Sometimes they succeeded; however, there still remained a group of parents so caught up in their destructive fighting that they were unable to find the space to work together.

The Lorentzhuis therapists were increasingly concerned about the children of these parents and referrals were sought to the KJTC.

However, the KJTC therapists had stopped working with the children of these fighting parents, because they found that the help they were able to offer was of no benefit and, in some cases, the children developed more serious symptoms. KJTC therapists found that through therapy, the children became more aware of their emotions, and especially their loneliness and their pain. Whilst they learned to express this in the context of therapy, they also became more aware of the powerlessness of their position. They could not express their pain at home because all utterances could be used as ammunition in the war between the parents. The child therapists therefore concluded that they should stop attempting to intervene with therapy as long as the context of the child's problems remained the parental war. In fact, these therapists had actually decided to refer these cases to the Lorentzhuis! Ultimately both services needed each other.

The two authors – Justine van Lawick from the Lorentzhuis, and Margreet Visser from the KJTC – therefore decided to engage in a dialogue exploring new ideas and practices that could potentially benefit these children and their parents. That is where the project '*No kids in the middle*' was born. This article draws on both research findings and our clinical experiences and reflections. Because the theme and area is rather new we cannot draw on much evidence at the moment. Apart from these articles, we have published a Dutch book about the project (van Lawick & Visser, 2014).

We could draw on many sources of inspiration in the development of this approach. Important are authors from the open dialogical practices network ([www.opendialogicalpractices.eu](http://www.opendialogicalpractices.eu): Rober, 2012; Seikkula & Arnkil, 2014; Shotter, 2005, 2008; Wilson, 2007). We also acknowledge Haim Omer (2010), who helped us to find anti-demonising and non-violent ways of working as well as including the network around families. Cecchin (1987) inspired us to stay curious and open minded. Bateson (1979) always invites us not to believe too much in our own ideas and theories. And White's (2007) narratives on identity, ceremonies and outsider witness helped us to create useful ceremonies for this project. To understand the trauma reactions of parents and children we drew, among others, on Siegel (2003) and Szalavitz and Perry (2011).

This article contains a description of the context, development and delivery of the approach. At this moment we do not have a scientific evaluation of the outcomes of

the first six groups. The *VU* (Vrije Universiteit van Amsterdam) has started outcome and qualitative research on the project.

### **Social and Legal Context**

In the Netherlands, due to various reasons, the number of children caught up in the acrimonious divorce of their parents has grown (Spruijt & Kormos, 2014). Since 1998, legal authority for children following divorce has been assigned to both parents rather than one parent. The emancipation of women has produced changes in patterns of childcare within families. Fathers have become more active in caring tasks and, as a consequence, have legitimised their legal right to see their children. Mothers have also become legally obliged to cooperate with access arrangements. A successful political lobby by *Fathers4Justice* resulted in equal legal power for both parents after divorce in the Netherlands in 1998 and in most other Western countries around that time.

Most parents are able to keep their children in mind whilst negotiating the complicated process of divorce. They separate as partners but stay active and connected as parents and give their children the feeling that they matter. Children are not solely victims in the divorce of their parents. They are also active in giving meaning to the divorce; they take a position and develop a personal narrative that helps them to go on. The *IPOS* (Interdisciplinary Project to Optimise Divorces) research (Buysse et al., 2011) shows that children have a lot of resilience – as long as they have the experience that they do matter to their parents.

A smaller group of parents are so caught up in their conflict that they are no longer really aware of the wellbeing of their children. They become convinced they have to fight against the other parent for the sake of the children. Because they love their children they feel driven to rescue them from the other parent's damaging behaviour. To these parents, a stop to the fighting feels as though they are abandoning their children. And so they continue to argue and fight about everything concerning the children: structure, family life, school, sports, contact arrangements, finances, birthdays, holidays, celebrations, and so on.

Such long, fierce battles became a growing concern to many of the professionals confronted with the pain of children caught up in these situations and requests were made for the introduction of legislation to better protect children from their fighting parents (Spruijt & Kormos, 2014). In 2009, the Netherlands introduced a new law that obliged parents to make a parental plan before being legally granted divorce. The unintended consequence of this legislation was that the relational war became situated even closer to the children. Research by Spruijt (Spruijt & Kormos, 2014) shows that this law aggravates the battles in high conflict divorces, the numbers went up: a clear example of a solution that creates a problem (Watzlawick, Weakland & Fisch, 1974).

### **The Dynamic of Fighting Divorces**

#### **Partners and parents**

Many love relationships start with romantic expectations: the other will always love me, understand me, listen to me, share with me, accept me as I am, and give me the feeling that I matter. Most people can handle the normal frustrations that arise when relational experiences diverge from the romantic dream. Many couples repair the rifts

in their relationship and adapt to frustrations, but in some cases these adaptations do not occur.

When frustrations such as one partner not listening, not understanding, or becoming angry, are experienced as personal attack, the other partner can become defensive. This defensiveness can take many forms, but can also be experienced by the other partner as reproach or attack that in turn calls for a defensive response. This repetition of attack and defence can escalate (van Lawick, 2008) so that a destructive dynamic colours the whole relationship. Both partners feel misunderstood, unloved and alone.

Psychological injuries dating back to childhood often resonate in these processes; the hope was that the partner would understand and heal the pain, not add to it. When both partners are hurt and frustrated, each tries to convince the other of their 'wrong' behaviour. Each becomes caught up in monologues about the other, able to identify the truth behind the façade of the other person, and therefore what is wrong with the other person. Pathologising the other can be part of this process. The other partner is said to have a narcissistic or psychopathic or borderline personality disorder, or to be delusional, or autistic, and so on. With the internet, they can 'prove' the psychopathology of the other partner with many examples, everything fits. The other partner becomes defined as a pathological human being who fails relationally, and the one who needs treatment and has to change! He or she can be seen as a 'monster,' a 'demon,' and the perpetrator of wrongs of which the other partner is a victim.

Alon and Omer (2006) link the process of demonisation with an inability to accept 'the tragedy of life' (p. 28). They contrast this with the dominant illusion that we can create a happy life with a loving relationship that gives us everything we need: enough money, attractive children who develop well, satisfying work, holidays and good friends. When this does not happen, explanations for the difficulties are sought in order that they can be eliminated or alleviated. For example, when children do not develop as expected an explanation is sought that involves a pathological label that determines good treatment and a solution to the problem. Similarly, with relational difficulties a cause is sought that will allow the partner to eliminate or alleviate the problem.

Alon and Omer (2006) propose that the opposite of demonisation is acceptance of the tragedy of life. We agree with this shift to a multi-voiced landscape where life is not always cheerful, satisfying, prosperous and changeable; it is also sad, unsatisfying, frustrating and unchangeable. When a person wishes to create the ideal life, but fails in spite of great perseverance and efforts to control life and control others, there emerges the potential for destructive processes to escalate. This destructiveness makes no space for accepting the tragedy of life, or for a multi-voiced dialogue to emerge. This process may lead to solitude and desolation, perhaps a new relationship that diminishes the sense of abandonment and, often, divorce.

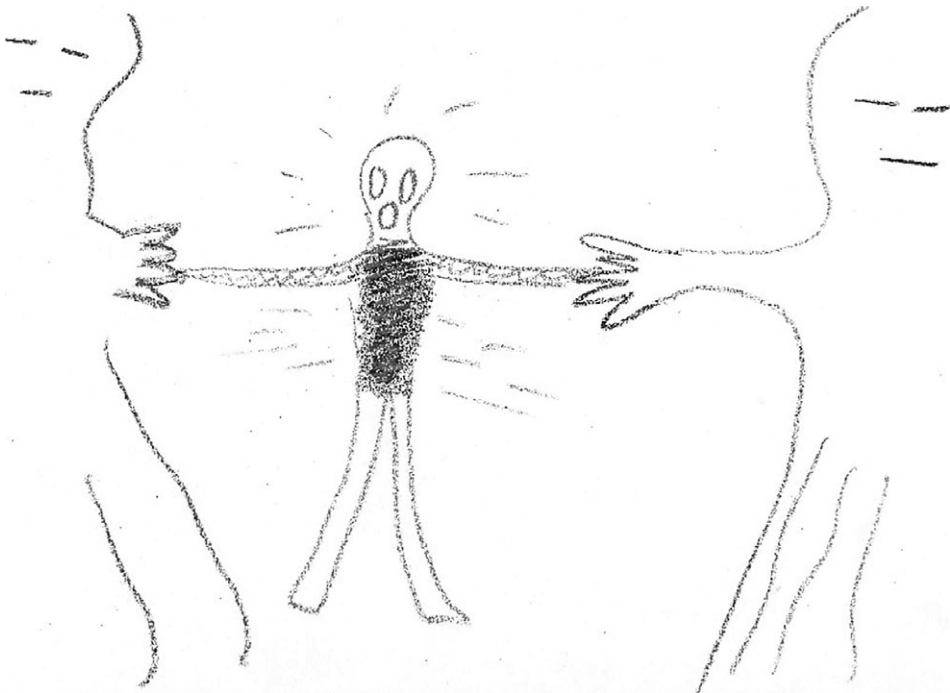
It is not surprising that the same destructive process continues after divorce. When lawyers, child advocates, mediators and judges ask for a good, child friendly parental plan, the negotiations required for this plan draw out the same intense fighting that preceded the separation. Parents act with the conviction that they have to protect their children from the harmfulness of the other parent. Parents feel compelled to protect their children against the 'demon' parent, and sacrifice more and more to continue the fight: money, family relationships, health, sleep, time, holidays, housing and friends. The more that is invested, the more intense the fighting. The idea that the fighting could all be for nothing is unbearable.

Other family members and friends can also become embroiled in the relational war. New partners can exert considerable influence, often as an ally to the parent in demonising the other parent. Over many years, two communities fight, two 'villages' combat each other.

### Children

The conflicts of the parents influence children's images of family life, love, parenthood and partnership. These images and experiences can make children feel sad, angry and anxious. In these emotional states they need their parents for comfort and protection, but the parents are at the same time the source of disquiet. This makes the children confused and lonely. The child that does not want to make a choice between parents is torn apart, but struggles to express this painful experience. If the child does express their pain it can easily become ammunition in the parents' battles, adding to the child's distress and the parents' mutually destructive behaviour.

As a consequence many children develop behaviour that others can see as problematic. They can be angry and oppositional, or silent and sad. Their inner balance is disrupted, resulting in sleep, concentration and eating problems, or psychiatric symptoms such as conversion. These children are often referred to child and



Drawing of a 7-year-old boy

The child is hanging between the parents, with no ground to stand on. All his senses are wide open and his drawing resembles 'The Scream' by Edvard Munch. The parents both pull at their child and he is being torn apart, yet they do not perceive what they are doing and seem to be blind and deaf. They are locked in on themselves and do not sense their child. This is one of the most emotionally charged and shocking images we have ever received from a child.

adolescent mental health services, but these professionals are limited in what they can do when the context of the child's distress does not change.<sup>1</sup>

Children can also become involved in the parents' fight by becoming an ally for one or the other parent. We understand that children make this choice because it can be unbearable to live for a long time caught between two different truths. It can be a relief to make a choice. The whole network may feel forced to make a choice as well, so that grandparents, family, friends, and often the professionals also make a choice between the fighting parents. We are therefore opposed to the idea that the children are diagnosed with the so-called *Parental Alienation Syndrome* (Gardner, 1998) when they make a choice. Of course they are influenced, as is the whole network. So why are the children burdened with a diagnosis? If we want to speak of parental alienation, we suggest that it is the parents who alienate themselves from each other, from the other parent with whom they had a child.

Some children try to ignore the parental war and concentrate on other things in life. They can do well in school and social life. Most of the time they turn to other safe resources like brothers, sisters, friends, parents of friends, or other involved persons. Nevertheless, although they do not show it, they too often suffer from their parents' endless disputes (Spruijt & Kormos, 2014).

## The Project

In the *No kids in the middle* project we try to find new roads that create a context for movement out of deadlock for these families. We try to create a dialogical space where rigid, destructive processes can be made more flexible and dialogical for parents, children and the professionals who work with them. We work with six families at a time. Twelve parents work with two therapists and, at the same time, all their children work with two therapists in a different room in the same building. Participants in both groups attend eight two-hour sessions, with a scheduled mid-session break.

Key principles for the project include: keeping the child in mind; working in groups; stopping legal processes; making free space for interactions; creative presentation ceremonies; and reaching out to the network. We discuss these six points below.

### Keeping the child in mind

The parents with whom we work are involved in relational wars that have already lasted many years – some as long as 12 years – that are full of destructiveness, revenge, paranoia and demonisation. Some children can only remember fighting parents.

The need to create a context where parents are able to sense their children again and make a safer place for them is not optional. These situations demand a therapeutic presence. We, as human beings, as professionals, as a community, cannot accept that children are maltreated for years. We want to connect to the parents and accept them, but we reject their destructive behaviour. We try to facilitate parents' rediscovery of their qualities as parents who see, hear, empathise and connect with their children. We try to create space where the fighting can be much less or even stops. We have learned not to be too romantic, not to expect all parents to be a better team. Sometimes parents are able to team up more and communicate better when they have their child in mind; but sometimes the differences or the hurts are so huge that the fighting can only stop if they take more distance and let the other parent do things his or her way, without interfering. Cottyn (2009) calls this 'parallel solo parenthood.'



In most cases, the two parents are capable of negotiating shared parenting roles in their children's lives. There are exceptions when one or both of the parents are so caught up in personal problems (e.g., addiction) that they cannot create a safe place in which their children can develop well. In such circumstances, a temporarily safer place for the children to live and develop may need to be created. This may be either in the context of one of the parents becoming the primary parent with legal authority or by placing the children in an alternative care setting, ideally with family members who love the children and are less caught up in the parental fighting. Such arrangements, however, must be regarded as exceptions when all other possibilities fail.

### **Working in groups**

For this project we chose to work in two groups: a parents' group and a children's group. Group work with fighting parents creates more space for both the therapists and the parents. Ex-partners can observe other ex-partners fighting, whilst observing their own conflicts at the same time. This invites and encourages reflection, which is often missing in demonising fights. Therapists are also able to adopt a different position. Instead of a possible ally for two fighting parents, the therapist can become the involved and observing outsider who tries to create a safe therapeutic context where change becomes possible.

In a group context parents are able to help each other. They understand the entanglements of the other parents. When common conflicts emerge, around holidays for example, they can see possibilities where others get stuck. While helping the other members of the group, they help themselves to navigate similar problems and often become more flexible in their own efforts to negotiate conflict. This frees the therapists from the expectation that it is solely their role to help find solutions for the 'insoluble' problems presented by members of the group.

Another advantage is that group members inspire each other to move from previously entrenched positions. For example, when two parents start to change and talk about new solutions and possibilities, and about the effect this is having on their children – how they are more relaxed and sleeping better – others feel inspired to do the same. Faced with examples of what may be possible these other parents may also want to move forward. This frees the therapist from having to motivate parents to move from their rigid positions.

Finally, a group approach makes it less likely that the therapist will adopt a 'colonising position' (Rober & Seltzer, 2010) wherein the therapist attempts to change the clients according to personal or professional theories and ideas.

The main goal for the group is, however, a constant: parents are invited to see, empathise and connect with their children and act with their child in mind. The road to this end, and the steps that can be taken towards it, are open. As therapists we adopt a position of curiosity and openness to the unexpected. We choose to focus on possibilities (Wilson, 2007).

Simultaneous parent and child sessions minimise the risk of 'drop out' or 'no show' due to baby-sitting problems. Simultaneous sessions also create space where parents and children come together and meet before the session, during the break, and at the end. For many families this is the first time in years that they are together. Group work creates the opportunity for parents to see the other parent interacting constructively with other group members and with the children.



### **Stopping legal processes**

We learned to create space for dialogue and change by setting a few rules and boundaries. Within these boundaries we give parents the responsibility to change the context for their children and we express trust that they can. Often there is a pressure on the parents from child protection agencies or judges to cooperate and join the project, but we do not put pressure on them. We explain that the project is hard work and it is possible to create a better situation for all involved, but that it will take great efforts from the parents and the therapists. There are a few important exclusion criteria: serious addictions, ongoing and actual violence, and ongoing legal procedures.

A condition of participation is that the parents stop all legal processes, or at least put them on hold during the project. We became aware of how many legal processes and trials these parents undergo and how much these processes add to the destructive and demonising dynamics of the parental fight. The legal arena focuses on winning or losing, defending one's territory. This creates distrust and makes it impossible to show vulnerability. In contrast, the therapeutic space is about building trust, about expressing hesitations and feeling vulnerable, about connection and about trying to understand the other. These two domains are incompatible (Groen, 2013).

### **Making free space for interactions**

A room where the families could come together without the presence of therapists turned out to be very important. A lot happens in the free unstructured time before the group sessions start, during the break and after the sessions. Sometimes change starts to happen in this room, and other areas away from the therapists, rather than in the therapy sessions. Children who have not seen one of the parents for some time (perhaps years) can mix with all the parents and children in the group, and are able to be in the same room as the alienated parent. For most children, this setting is the first time in years that they have seen both of their parents in the same room.

Two divorced parents with four children were in the family room. The two youngest children visited their father regularly however, on this occasion, the eldest son saw his father for the first time in years. When he saw how happy and loving the father was toward his younger brother, he started to move towards his father as well.

### **Creative presentation ceremonies**

The children's group aims to give the children a voice and to stimulate their resilience without being caught in the fights of their parents and their personal pain. The children are encouraged to make a theatre production or movie around the topic of their fighting parents, or choose some other form of artistic expression. They are invited to enter the metaphorical world of their imagination. Parents are given the assignment to prepare a presentation at home about what they have learned in the group and what they wish for their children in the future.

If children or parents do not want to present we do not press them. Most children find a way to be involved, sometimes by making a choice of music to be played rather than being on stage themselves. Sometimes parents say they do not have time to prepare. We tell them not to worry, and assure them that if they want to say something we will make space for this. When the parents who have prepared their assignment present it to their children, the other parents do not want to leave their children with nothing and offer a short spontaneous speech. In this setting, everybody is vulnerable

and feels a bit exposed. This creates space for new movements, possibilities and connections. These ceremonies are very powerful in bringing about positive change.

### **Reaching out to the network**

Involved network members may include: grandparents, brothers and sisters, other family members, new partners, the family and children of the new partner, friends, neighbours, school/workmates and professionals. These network members are very actively involved in the relational war. They tend to take side with one of the parents who they define to be the victim of the other one. They try to be a good ally but fail to improve the situation.

We encountered difficulties after noticing that positive changes in the group had disappeared by the next session. We understood that the social network around each parent did not expect or understand the changes and reacted in a usual way that drew the situation back in the well-known old interactions. So we decided that it was also important to connect to the involved people around the families. We organised a network evening to be held before the first group session.

In this session parents can bring as many persons from their network as they want, including personal contacts and professional people. On one occasion 70 persons attended. We make it clear that the evening is important as part of the preparation for the project and that it increases the likelihood of success. Attendance at the evening is anonymous, and its focus is to be informative. Only the therapists introduce themselves. At the network evening we present the project. We provide information about our basic principles and assumptions, how we work, and why we do what we do. We are as open as possible. People can ask questions; we are responsive.

A grandfather asked, 'What do you do when one parent refuses to cooperate?' A therapist answered, 'I can imagine that you have lost hope over the years that positive change is possible. I think that many of you have. But we believe that it is possible. We have to, because we cannot give up on the children.'

At the end of the evening all therapists line up before the public group and ask, 'Please support us. Without your support we cannot make it work. Please help us in this work.' Every time we organise this evening, many attendees thank us at the end; they wish us good luck and tell us they hope we will do well. *'It has already taken much too long.'*

After the network evening, we continue to reach out to them during the project. We ask parents to share what we cover in the group with their network. We ask them to see movies together that address a relevant topic, and to reflect together on the movie. We send text messages for them to share with their networks. Sometimes we have in-between sessions with new partners or other network members. We try to be as responsive as we can because our experience is that this makes positive movement so much more possible. It also means that we need to create time in our agendas to be responsive.

### **Working with the Parents**

We developed a framework in which parents can feel safe enough to become calm in each other's presence, thus creating a space to listen and reflect. In the context of this article we focus on the dialogical aspects of practice. The open dialogue allows us to be open to the unexpected and to understand the parents from within our

interactions and involvements with them. This understanding from 'within' instead of 'thinking about' is clearly described by Shotter (2005):

While we can study already completed, dead forms at a distance, seeking to understand the pattern of past events that caused them to come into existence, we can enter into a relationship with a living form and, in making ourselves open to its movements, find ourselves spontaneously responding to it. In other words, instead of seeking to explain a present activity in terms of its past, we can understand it in terms of its meaning for us, now, in the present moment, in terms of our spontaneous responses to it. It is only from within our involvements with other living things that this kind of meaningful, responsive understanding becomes available to us (p. 140).

So we position ourselves in the present moment, with space for spontaneous responses to the direct experiences in the group. Being *with* the parents we find that trying to control the parents is unhelpful. These parents are experts in making agreements: mediators have helped them to make agreements about everything in life, but afterwards the parents accuse each other of not keeping to the agreements.

The parents start to expect the same from us. They tell us that we are the last straw of hope, that they cannot believe that we can help but they are curious what we are going to do. This attitude of sitting back and waiting to see what the other is going to do, and of reacting to what is done, leads only to repetition of previous patterns. To arrive in a landscape of new possibilities, of new movements, we have to invite the parents to try a new dance.

We do this by not knowing what steps to take next, by asking for their help again and again: 'Please help us! What would be a good next step to take out of this painful situation? Is there anybody with an idea?' We acknowledge their pain and their efforts, always keeping in mind the wellbeing of their children and believing that we can work toward a better situation for all.

We as therapists can be 'within' the process, but the parents often stick to 'aboutness thinking' in their analysis of what is wrong, what has to change and what the therapists have to do. In order to avoid arguments with the parents we developed experiential exercises that can bring about movement. We describe three such exercises.

### **Pictures and stories**

For the first session, we ask the parents to bring pictures of their children. In the group, we ask them to introduce themselves as parents, to show the pictures of their children to the group and tell the group about a special and concrete memory of an experience together with that child. When there are 12 children of these 12 parents we listen together to 24 very short stories, full of relational experiencing and emotion. They can be very recent events or experiences of togetherness that come to mind in the here and now. Stories can be about baking cookies together, a talk at the bedside, laughing together, playing with a ball, helping each other. Anything meaningful will do. This exercise can be very painful for parents who have not seen their children, sometimes for years.

**Tom:** I cannot tell you about a memory because I have not seen my daughter for four years now, because she [the other parent] has made me a monster in the eyes of Iris.

**Therapist:** I hear you telling us that you have not seen your daughter for four years, and how painful that experience is for you. But maybe you can share with us a wonderful experience with Iris that occurred before that time?

**Tom:** [silent for some time]: ... I think of the day she was born, the best day of my life. [He bursts into tears. The whole group is touched by his sorrow. Even the mother of Iris seems to be confused.]

In one group, the fathers started to tell the group about very expensive and fancy experiences, like deep sea diving or paragliding. This created an atmosphere of competition and unease in the group, which the therapists also felt.

**Therapist:** What exciting experiences! We can all imagine that the children would have liked them. Experiences can also be about small occasions of being in contact, about the special relationship you have with your special child, like having an intimate talk at the bedside, or baking cookies together.

**Emma:** OK. Yesterday, I was with Dave at the center – Food for Free. Dave told me that he wanted to do that kind of work when he was a grown up, that he wanted to help other people. I was so touched by what he said, I gave him a big hug. He hugged me as well, and we felt very much together.

This story raised the sense of warmth in the group and made space for a great diversity of stories and experiences. After all the stories were spoken the whole atmosphere in the room changed. We have the sense of being with twelve loving parents and their lovely children together. The therapist can express a sense of hope that comes from this and also the sadness that so much love and connection has been overshadowed by all the conflicts and fighting.

### Children in the middle

In the next session we conduct an exercise aimed at getting the parents to place themselves in the position of their children. We start the exercise by gathering accusations often used by parents in conflict on a flip chart, like: 'You are only thinking of yourself!', 'You just want all the money!', 'After spending time with you, the children are impossible!', 'You never keep your promises! Do you even know what that means for the little one?!', 'You're always lying!', and so on. After a while the parents come up with a big list, and can even laugh about all the recognisable examples.

We then put four parents on little chairs in the centre of the room. We ask them to imagine themselves as children, though not their own child, and to focus on their bodily sensations. The rest of the group is divided into two opposing lines of four parents. They are asked to shout accusations at each other across the room, while the 'children' sit silently in the middle. After about two minutes of fighting we stop and ask the 'children' on the small chairs what they have felt. What these parents as children experience always leaves a deep impression. Some become white as a ghost, others start to cry as if they suddenly realise what it must be like for their children. They know, more than we might expect, how to describe what they experience as the child. The sentences they utter are written down on a flip chart.

'Stop it!', 'I can't choose.', 'I want to get out of here!', 'I don't want to be here!', 'I close my ears.', 'I'm scared.', 'I feel like crying.', 'Why don't you see me?', 'You're not at all concerned about me!', 'I want to help but I cannot understand what's going on.', 'I want it to stop!', 'I want to go somewhere else!', 'I'm getting angry!', 'Everything hurts!' ...

This exercise often proves to be transforming. Inner reflection has started. Afterwards, we reflect together on what they have experienced and what it tells them about

their children. In the post-group evaluation, parents describe this experience as transformative.

### **Movement out of dead lock**

Usually around session four, when confidence in the group has grown, we start to work together on the problematic issues that occur again and again and are experienced and described as unresolvable.

We have developed a dialogical way of working with these issues where the whole group is active and on the move. We developed this way of working together with the second group who participated in the project and continued with it because it proved to be so useful to and valued by all parents. This way of working, which includes elements of ritual and ceremony, is also not fixed and can change flexibly.

All group members are actively involved. One parent pair presents an issue that they, as parents, have become stuck in. Each parent then chooses a 'buddy,' a supportive group member who can also help that parent to move. Four parents are 'children' sitting in small children's chairs (see section 'Children in the middle'). The 'children' are asked to move closer to or further from the 'parents' in response to the physical and emotional sensations they experience while the 'parents' interact. In this way they can give direct emotional feedback on the parents' conversation. The other four parents are asked to use their own experience to be 'coaches,' to think about possible solutions, give advice or helpful reflections, coming from their own experiences. And the therapists are present within the moment. Everybody is actively involved. The therapists step back and say, 'OK, go ahead, find a solution. The children need it.' The parents start with their arguments.

Barry explains that it is impossible to return from the holiday in Turkey on Friday. It is an all-inclusive week, and they have a flight back on Saturday. Sheila reacts that this is not her business, that the agreement is that her holiday week with the children starts on the Friday, that she is due to leave with the children on Friday to go camping in France together with her children and her friend. They are sharing a car and she cannot let her friend wait until Sunday. The argument goes back and forth. Neither parent listens to the other. They only try to convince the other. As Barry and Sheila continue, the 'children' move backwards, away from the arguing couple. The conflictual communication of the parents does not change. The therapists stop the argument and ask the 'children' about what made them move backwards, about what they feel. The 'children' express their discomfort with the parental argument and they feel nausea, stomach-aches, headaches. They all feel stressed and want to leave the room, close their ears, scream. They feel as though they do not matter, that it is just about the parents, even when the parents say they are doing this for the sake of the children. The 'children' do not want to go on holidays anymore, neither to Turkey nor to France. They say that they feel hopeless . . .

It strikes us again and again how well the parents can express what the children feel when they are in the small chairs as children of fighting parents.

The 'buddies' are asked to reflect with the parents. They can support the parents but also help them to improve the situation for the 'children.' Meanwhile the 'coaches' are invited to exchange reflections and ideas.

After a short time the therapists ask the parents to go on. Barry starts by saying that he understands that he put Sheila in a difficult situation by returning late on Saturday when she expected to leave on Friday. The 'children' move forward a little. Sheila starts to listen and is surprised: 'You never say you understand me! Of course, I understand

your problem as well, that you cannot change an all-inclusive holiday package, but you should have thought about it when you booked the holiday.' Barry replies, 'I didn't expect you to make such a fuss about one day. I suppose I thought you would imagine the children having fun in that hotel in Turkey, with a swimming pool and everything.' The children move back again. The parents start to become aware of the movement in front of them. Sheila says, 'Of course I can imagine that they would enjoy the hotel and swimming pool ...' (The children move a little forward.) '... You should have communicated your plans better. You never do!' (The children move back again.) Both parents give a deep sigh.

We ask the 'coaches' for help. It is wonderful how parents can give each other advice in a way that we as therapists never allow ourselves to. One father said to Barry, 'Why don't you drive the children to France on Sunday, so that Sheila can leave with her friend on Friday?' A mother suggested that Sheila could leave on Sunday but also stay a couple more days at the end. Another parent asked about travel insurance in case the week in Turkey could be cancelled or changed.

After all these reflections and suggestions we ask the parents again to come to a solution. When the parents continue to be stuck in arguments, we ask the buddies to play the solution 'as if' they were the parents. We explain that it is often much easier to see where you can go if you are not part of the dynamic. If the 'buddies' act out a potential solution, where the children move their chairs forward, the parents can finish the ritual by trying to repeat the solution acted out by the buddies by doing it themselves.

In the end, Barry offered to drive the children to the camping ground in France so that Sheila could leave on the Friday and prepare the camping ground.

Sometimes parents do not reach good outcomes from the dead-lock in the session. We put no pressure on them, but simply stop the ritual and express curiosity about what the next steps might be. We like to hear about this at the next session. Groups are enthusiastic about this way of working and sometimes four parent couples ask to work on their issues in one session. We have learned very simply to divide the time so that all parents who so wish can initiate some movement that often continues in the time between sessions.

### **Working with the Children**

The children meet with two therapists at the same time and in the same building whilst the parents attend their group. By having two parallel groups children witness their parents taking responsibility and working together. This can be a relief. Although the parents often fight about them, it is important to remember that the children are not responsible for the fights of their parents. Because of the different ages of the children (4–18 years), it is useful when two therapists and a trainee are present. The children regularly work in smaller (age-related) groups. They support and stimulate each other, learn from each other, and function like a small village.

The children's group is not organised as a therapy group with a program to process painful experiences. We do not want to problematise or pathologise the children, although many of them have serious symptoms. We want to relate to them in their power and resilience. Of course the effect of the group can be very therapeutic. The main activity in the group is artistic expression connected to the situation in which they live. We offer a range of possibilities: film, photography, drawing, painting,

graffiti, collage, dance, theatre, music, or other ideas that the children themselves bring to us. All children have something that they like to do; we do not put pressure on them. We invite them to work with us on a presentation of their art for the parents, but of course let them select what they want to show.

In structuring the children's group, we create a rhythm that is repeated during the sessions with the children:

*Warming up.* Each session begins with a warm up activity aimed at helping the children to let go of their daily worries and be in the present moment. Children can throw a soft ball to each other, calling the name of that child, or they can copy each other's movements one after another, and so on.

*Artistic expression.* The children work in their own way on their project. Many children like to work together. Some work on their own.

*Break.* The break can be stressful and exciting for the children who have not seen their parents together for a long time or who have not seen one of the parents for a long time. The children are invited to share what they feel and think about their experience and to consider what they might be able to do if they do not feel at ease. Sometimes children relax and are happy to see their parents together.

*Reactions.* After the break, the children are invited to talk about what they experienced during the break. Children also share observations: 'I saw that your father offered you a drink and you accepted it!' They can interview each other like television reporters for a youth program. Children can also talk about their experiences while making art.

Children who had acted out a scene of a school class with quarrelling teachers expressed how they felt. They did not feel safe and they did not know what to do when the teachers disagreed. The children also started to feel angry: 'What's the point?', 'I couldn't concentrate at all!', and 'I wanted to leave the room!' This last response came from a 9 year old girl who repeatedly ran away from home.

*Reflections.* The children are invited, but never pressed, to reflect and talk about the connections between their artistic expressions and their home situations. They talk about feeling powerless, about trying to help their parents to stop fighting or trying to help their parents to like each other again. They also talk about blaming one of their parents, perhaps seeing one parent as the bad one and the other one as the good parent. When children share these thoughts, other children in the group always question this reality. The therapists do not have to do so.

When talking about their home situations, children sometimes think, 'Stop this! Think about me!' They cannot understand why their parents, both of whom they love, are unable to reconcile.

In one presentation all the children entered the room demonstrating their message to all the parents by making huge banners with the words, STOP FIGHTING!

Children also help each other and give ideas about how to suffer less from the parental fights. For instance, when the parents are screaming at each other or through the phone, one child suggested putting in earplugs and listening to good music. This support from other children is important because although we wish for all parents to stop fighting, we are not always successful and we let the children know this. With this reality in mind, the support of the children's group and the ideas that come from it can help them to be more resilient in the future, and to suffer less.



Sometimes children just want to hang around and do nothing for some time. Or they need time to do some homework. We make sure that this, too, is possible!

### Children and Parents in the Presentation Ceremonies

Session seven starts with preparations in both groups. In the parents' group, we particularly concentrate on issues for the parents to anticipate as they see and listen to their children's presentations. We ask the parents to support the children as much as possible because they are in a vulnerable position when they present. We also ask them to concentrate on themselves while watching the presentations, to notice what is happening inside. When invited, the parents enter the space where the children have worked. It is touching to see how the children care for their parents: 'Here's a chair for you mum; dad you can sit here.' Children may sit on the lap of one parent then change to sit on the lap of the other parent after some time. We have had many different presentations from the children.

Two groups had a joint venture in which they made a small movie. One movie was about two teachers who demonised each other. The children acted out situations where the two teachers met before the class and started to fight and scream at each other. Some children went away, others withdrew, some expressed how confused they were, or tried to stop the teachers from fighting. The children were energised by screaming, all together, 'STOP IT! STOP IT! STOP IT!'

The other movie was about a 10-year-old girl who had to change home and school because of the divorce of her parents. In the movie script all the children and the teacher of the new class had divorced parents. This expressed a wish by the children not to be thought of as an exception. The teacher (played by Dido, a boy aged 11) talked with the class about the experience of having parents who fight. Dido spoke about how sad he was, saying, 'It is as if you do not have parents. They fight like children and you as a child have to be the wise one.' Making the movies together was also fun. The children laughed a lot. Two 14 year-old girls who did not want to perform theatrically searched for the right music for the movie. They found a touching song by Mindy Smith and Matthew Perryman Jones, 'Anymore of This' (Smith, Jones & Jones, 2013), which included the lines:

*Everything's familiar,  
But I don't know who I am  
Do you know where you're going?  
Don't even know where I've been  
Watching moments pass  
I wanna run away from it  
But I still don't take that step  
Locked inside the glass  
An empty box of memories  
And a heart full of regret  
Do you know where you're going?  
Don't even know where I am*

Other groups presented different forms of artistic expression: drawings, graffiti, sequences of photographic stills, dance. Two boys made the graffiti text: Change home!

(meaning something has to change at home), Behave normal man, relax! Beneath the text were two animals: a trembling small animal on four legs with blood dripping from the belly; and a huge angry werewolf with a full moon with black holes in it behind the werewolf. The boys explained that when parents fight they start to feel like a scared animal, trembling all over their body, but when it goes on they become very angry, like a werewolf. When presenting to the parents and therapists, the boys explained their art, like museum guides. The first boy, who spoke about the scared animal, had been diagnosed with conversion disorder and hospitalised several times. The other boy, explaining the werewolf, had been diagnosed with oppositional defiant disorder. When asked about the black holes in the moon, he said with a serious and deep voice, 'They are the unknown holes.' Three girls, aged four, eight and ten, worked on three dances connected to their experience of being children of fighting parents: a dance of sadness, a dance of anger, and a solo dance of confusion. They chose sad, angry, and confusing music.

A 15-year-old boy with chronic severe headaches for which he had many different medical investigations without any clear outcome, made a shield: 'When you fight I get stressed. From the stress, I get headaches. Because of the headaches, I cannot concentrate. That's why I fail in school!' After this, he played a moving guitar solo because he also wanted to console and comfort his parents.

During the children's presentation, the parents are deeply affected by the effort the children have to put in the presentations, they are impressed and moved. They often feel ashamed about their children's clear messages. Stress is obvious on the children's faces, they watch the reactions of their parents more than they watch the presentations. At the end, the therapists and the parents applaud. Before the break, the children and the parents sit together briefly in their respective groups to share their initial reactions and emotions.

After the break, the parents sit together briefly to prepare for the presentations that they worked on at home. They have been invited to work with their networks in their preparations. Most parents have prepared something to present, but some have not. We tell these parents that there is also space for them to present if they wish.

One mother brought her 10-year-old son's school backpack filled with heavy stones that were wrapped in paper with text on it. She explained that her son had carried these burdens for much too long, and that she had now understood that it was the burden of his parents, not his burden. She took the stones one by one from his backpack, reading the words about sadness, anger and fighting. She also brought some beautiful small and light gemstones, and told him he could choose one. She also drew coloured cards and wrote her wishes for him on them and gave them to him to put in his backpack. The boy reacted by laughing and crying at the same time. His father wrote him a poem about their life together and his wishes for their future.

Another mother sang a song, dancing under an umbrella. She sang, 'I'm singing in the rain ...' She explained that there still was rain but that she and her children also could sing and dance together again and that this was her wish for the future.

Two parents made a film clip together with clear messages about what they learned and what they wished for their children. To this point in time, they have been the only parents who have presented together.

Sometimes the presentations are spontaneous speeches and sometimes speeches can also create some discomfort. One father used the space to tell his son that he understood that his parents should not use him again as a referee, and that he now expected his

son to improve at school in order to have a successful and happy future and so on. These words were familiar to the son.

We have found that the children love the efforts that their parents make for them. After six groups we have a rich collection of possible presentations. The whole ritual is a powerful experience that creates space for a new dance.

## Conclusions

After the seven groups that we have completed we can tell that this way of working is enriching for children, parents and therapists. The elements of an *open dialogue* – not knowing, believing, being present, ceremonies and creative expression, seem to open up new possibilities and spaces for families and professionals who get stuck in repetition, destruction and dead lock. Still, we do not reach all families in our groups and we are continually looking for new and better ways.

Our clinical impression, also supported by evaluation sessions with the parents and children, is that in each group: two families were able to reach a turning point, to stop the destructive fighting so that the children were in a much better place; in two cases the children and parents were in a better place but they needed some follow up sessions to keep it going; and two families were still stuck and frustrated, but most of these families wanted to continue to work with us. Because of our dialogical way of working we are feedback oriented and will keep moving and changing, together with the parents and children with whom we work. We will continue to be responsive to their voices.

**Jimmy:** ‘Things are so much better now. My parents do not fight anymore, they have stopped talking. But they said hello last time when daddy fetched me.’

**Marieke (a mother):** ‘When I saw that other mother saying only bad things about the father I felt ashamed because I realised: I do the same, I use the same words.’

## End Note

<sup>1</sup> Permission has been granted to use this drawing.

## References

- Alon, N., & Omer, H. (2006). *The Psychology of Demonization. Promoting Acceptance and Reducing Conflict*. Mahwah, New Jersey, London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.
- Bateson, G. (1979). *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Buyse, A., Put, J., Rober, P., Schoors, K., Taelman, P., & Verschelden, G. (2011). *Is er een goede manier om te scheiden? ‘Interdisciplinair Onderzoek naar Optimalisatie van Scheidings-trajecten – IPOS’*. Leuven: UGent en de K.U.
- Cecchin, G. (1987). Hypothesizing, circularity, and neutrality revisited: An invitation to curiosity. *Family Process*, 26(4), 405–413.
- Cottyn, L. (2009). Conflicten tussen ouders na scheiding. *Systeemtheoretisch Bulletin*, 27, 131–161.
- Gardner, R.A. (1998). *The Parental Alienation Syndrome, a Guide for Mental Health and Legal Professionals*. Creskill: Creative Therapeutics.

- Groen, M. (2013). Spanningen tussen twee systemen: zorg en recht, in M. Groen & M.J. van Lawick (Eds.), *Intieme Oorlog. Over de kwetsbaarheid van familierelaties*. Amsterdam: van Gennep.
- van Lawick, M.J. (2008). Geweld, in A. Savenije, M.J. van Lawick & E.T.M. Reijmers (Eds.), *Handboek Systeemtherapie* (pp. 535–547). Utrecht: De Tijdstroom.
- van Lawick, M.J., & Visser, M.M. (2014). *Kinderen uit de Knel, een interventie voor gezinnen verwickeld in een vechtscheiding*. Amsterdam: SWP.
- Omer, H. (2010). *The New Authority. Family, School and Community*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rober, P. (2012). *Gezinstherapie in praktijk. Over ontmoeting, proces en context*. Leuven: Acco.
- Rober, P., & Seltzer, M. (2010). Avoiding colonizer positions in the therapy room: Some ideas about the challenges of dealing with the dialectic of misery and resources in families. *Family Process*, 49(1), 123–137.
- Seikkula, J., & Arnkil, T.E. (2014). *Open Dialogues and Anticipations. Respecting Otherness in the Present Moment*. Tampere: Finnish University Print Ltd.
- Shotter, J. (2005). Goethe and the refiguring of intellectual inquiry: From ‘aboutness’ thinking to ‘withness’ thinking in everyday life. *Janus Head*, 8(1), 132–158.
- Shotter, J. (2008). Dialogism and polyphony in organizing theorizing in organization studies: Action guiding anticipations and the continuous creation of novelty. *Organization Studies*, 29(04), 501–524.
- Smith, M., Jones, M.P., & Jones, S. (2013). Anymore of this. [Recorded by Smith, M. and Jones, M.P.] [single release] 2013.
- Solomon, M., & Siegel, D. (2003). *Healing Trauma: Attachment, Mind, Body and Brain*. New York: Norton.
- Spruijt, E., & Kormos, H. (2014). *Handboek scheiden en de kinderen* (2nd ed.). Houten: Bohn, Stafleu & van Loghum.
- Szalavitz, M., & Perry, B.D. (2011). *Born for Love: Why Empathy is Essential and Endangered*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Watzlawick, P., Weakland, J.H., & Fisch, R. (1974). *Change: Principles of Problem Formation and Problem Resolution*. New York: Norton and Company.
- White, M. (2007). *Maps of Narrative Practice*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Wilson, J. (2007). *The Performance of Practice*. London: Karnac.